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ABSTRACT

This article describes a project-oriented approach to teaching language awareness at the college freshman level. It is emphasized that it is important for students to realize that language is dynamic and that it changes because people change. The study of slang can make the student aware of the changeableness of a living language. Students were asked to be attentive to the use of slang terms in the university community in particular and then to fill out 3x5 data collection cards, with one card for each word or term. Once these cards were submitted, they were edited, and repetitions and obvious and non-slang terms were eliminated. A 19-page dictionary with space for redefining and a method of indicating the frequency of usage of the terms was then compiled. It was found that for the students, the group nature of the work they were doing and the naturalness and practicality of their assignments were impressive features of the project. They understood the necessity of investigating the data that they compiled and they found themselves actually working with the dynamics of the language, its etymologies, word-formation techniques, and the mechanisms of language. (Author/CK)

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INCREASING LANGUAGE AWARENESS THROUGH THE STUDY OF SLANG

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The English Department at the University of Vermont has recently introduced a new course, Introduction to the English Language, into its curriculum. This course is comprised of three major areas of language study chosen each semester from a larger body of topics: lexicology, dialectology, the nature of language, transformational-generative grammar and other recent analyses of the language, kinesics, historical influences upon and changes within the language, and functional varieties of English in speech and writing.

While planning a five-week section of lexicology, we confronted a pedagogical dilemma. We realized the value and necessity of including an historical survey of lexicography, an examination of the

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lexicographer's methodology, and a study of one or more of the recently published dictionaries. However, when we considered that the course was on the introductory level and intended primarily for freshmen, we recognized the inherent difficulties of such an approach. The students could easily become lethargic and the classes boringly methodical, since most freshmen lack background and training in language study. Since our primary goal was to stimulate "language awareness," we decided upon a "project-oriented" approach. We wanted students to immerse themselves totally in their study, to put on the garb of the lexicographer. In short, we had our classes compile a dictionary of college slang used at the University of Vermont. While "slanguage" is labeled NOT RESPECTABLE in many quarters, our experience confirmed the value that we had envisioned in the project at the planning stage. Throughout the five-week period while the students were collecting data and compiling their dictionary, we were able to draw parallels between their experiences with slang and a more traditional study of lexicography. In its own way, the experience of compiling a slang dictionary exposed each student to various language phenomena. Although it is possible to show the dynamic and sociological aspects of language from an historical point of view, slang reveals these features with a clarity and immediacy that have a profound impression upon students. Having been placed in the role of lexicographers, the students came to recognize the arduous tasks of their professional counterparts in collecting data, establishing a philosophical stance of prescription or description, and supplying definitions. What follows is a discussion of some of the valuable adjuncts of our experience with lexicology and the slang dictionary and some suggestions for other classroom uses of slang projects.

It is important for students to realize that language is dynamic and that it changes because people change. Although we continue to do basically the things we have always done, we do not do them in quite the same ways with quite the same objects. Not only do new things need new names but the names of old things are constantly changing. The changes that have occurred in English since the days of Old English have been a function of the very progress of man. Language is continually at play with itself and the forces which operate upon it. It reaches out and attaches itself to these new forces; it reflects and feeds upon itself, reorganizes, reconstructs, and reaches out anew; and these changes are more clearly obvious over a number of years or even centuries. What the study of slang can do for the student is make this

play, this organism, visible and representative of the liveliness of language as a whole.

Man is a symbol-making creature and his use of symbols is one of his greatest achievements. The symbol and its referent, however, are never in a fixed and unalterable relationship; the symbol, the word, never becomes the thing itself. The word *tight*, for instance, has long been used to mean 'cheap' or 'drunk,' more recently 'nervous,' and currently 'going steady.' The attempt to determine the possible origins of a slang term also involves the student in etymology and usage history, but, more importantly, it does this in a meaningful way: the student is not asked to work his way through a series of unrelated and meaningless exercises.

With the achievement of greater language awareness comes greater social awareness. In order to fully understand what is happening to the language of a particular area or linguistic community, a student must achieve a general knowledge of the development of American speech, its spread westward, and the changes it underwent in its movement as well as differences in grammar and vocabulary. In detail, information concerning the settlement of the community, its racial and national constituencies, and population shifts and changes in the character of a population that occur throughout the history of a particular community should be gathered.

In this context we might emphasize the importance of the male-female ratio of the linguistic community in question. Since it is generally agreed that males are responsible for the creation and use of most slang terms, the amount of slang and its characteristics may be a function of this male-female ratio. For example, there was in our own investigative sample a 22/78 male-female ratio which we feel accounted, in part, for the rather conservative or modest nature of the slang terms submitted to us.

In collecting such information, the student hopefully becomes aware of why his community takes on the atmosphere it does, why it manufactures or grows what it does, why it celebrates the holidays it does, and why it has the stores and sells the products it does. Geography and, in particular, proximity to major population centers, the characteristics of such centers, the implications of a nearby state or international border, or the presence of a college or particular type of industry are some of the important related matters that enter into the dynamics of any language.

An interesting example of our own present-day cultural biases can be seen in the many space-age and violence-related entries in our dictionary: *crash, crashpad, dynamite, fall-out, fire-up, flash,*

kill, speed, crack me up, bust, rip off, and *hit*. All the considerations discussed here should finally serve to highlight the fact that the study of slang, of language, is fascinating because it is ultimately the study of people.

Students were asked to be attentive to the use of slang terms in the university community in particular and then to fill out 3x5 data collection cards with one card for each word or term. We wanted to know the age, sex, race, and occupation of the informant. We also wanted to know if he was an out-of-stater or an in-stater and, finally, if he was from a rural or urban environment. The following format was used on the cards:

FRONT SIDE

Term: fire-up
Part(s) of speech: verb
Definition: to drink alcoholic beverages for the purpose of raising spirits and enthusiam
Sentence: Let's fire-up for the hockey game.

BACK SIDE

Informant's name: John Jones
Age: 19
Sex: Male
Race: Caucasian
Occupation: Student
Hometown: Springfield State: Massachusetts
Collector's name: Sally Smith
Comments: This term is widely used by sports spectators on the UVM campus.

Once these cards were submitted, they were edited, and repetitions and obvious non-slang terms were eliminated. No real attempt was made to be especially thorough at this stage of the project. A nineteen page dictionary with space for redefining and a method of indicating the frequency of usage of the terms was then compiled. One of the objectives here was to have students learn to write lexical definitions. The responses of students to this interim dictionary and the many other terms that were added along the way went into the compilation of the final dictionary.

The following is a list of sample entries from that dictionary*

**Paul A. Eschholz and Alfred F. Rosa, "Slang at the University of Vermont," Current Slang, 5, No. 4 (Spring 1971).*

which will be used as examples in the discussion that follows.

Ace, v. To do well on an examination or term paper.

Bag it, v. To quit, to cancel, to skip.

Cap, n. Drug capsule.

Cool, adj. Nice, pleasing, stimulating, or interesting.

Cool it, v. To act casually.

Crash, v. To sleep, especially after losing the effect of drugs.

Doof, n. A bumbling fool, idiot.

Dynamite, adj. An exclamation about a situation or thing that makes one very happy.

Fall-out, v. To go to sleep.

Fine, adj. Having extremely good looks.

Fire-up, v. To drink alcoholic beverages for the purpose of raising spirits.

Flash, n. A hallucinogenic experience.

———, n. A tantalizing glimpse of a girl's anatomy or undergarments.

———, v. To vomit.

Flip-out, v. To go almost insane, especially as a result of drug use.

Freaky, adj. Way out, extraordinary (honorific).

Green Death, n. Diarrhea and nausea resulting from eating university cafeteria food.

Groovy, adj. Nice or interesting.

Hassle, n. A difficult or irritating situation.

Hassle Castle, n. Converse Hall dormitory at the University of Vermont of Gothic architecture (castle) with intricate and troublesome passageways (hassle).

Heavy, adj. Deep, profound, serious, philosophic.

Jello, adj. Flexible, agreeable.

Kerky-jerkies, n. Butterflies, nervousness, or mistakes that result from nervousness.

Kill, v. To do exceptionally well on an exam; (passive usage) to do poorly on an exam.

MERP Week, n. Men's Economic Recovery Program, university of Vermont's version of a "Sadie Hawkins" week.

Merp, v. To ask for a date during MERP Week.

Merper, n. A girl who asks a boy for a date during MERP Week.

Porno, n. Pornography.

Racer-chaser, n. A ski manufacturer's representative who takes care of a racer's skis.

Rents, n. Parents.

Tight, adj. Involved, serious, or really close, as in a dating re-

lationship.
Tp, n. Toilet paper.
_____, v. To wrap in toilet paper.
U-vum, n. University of Vermont (UVM).
Z's, n. Sleep.

In our age of cultural expansion, there is a constant demand for new words. One need only to look to the rapid development of the aerospace, food, clothing, and music industries, for example, to see the tremendous increase of commodities in need of word labels. The situation becomes more manageable for students once they recognize the informality and ease of "word-making." Human beings exercise complete freedom in making and assigning values to their symbols. Since slang behaves in much the same ways that "normal" vocabulary items do, the data collected by the students illustrates many of the common kinds of word formation.

One relatively common process is reduplication. In this process the same morpheme is repeated in the same or a slightly different form. Reduplicatives like *pooh-pooh, chug-chug,* and *goody-goody* illustrate the unchanged form. When one changes either the initial consonant or an internal vowel, such forms as *hodge-podge, razzle-dazzle, hotsy-totsy, zig-zag, riff-raff,* and *tick-tock* are produced. Our students discovered these reduplicatives in their own speech: *kerky-jerkies, Hassle Castle,* and *racer-chaser*.

The proliferation of new organizations and technological instruments with rather long, specific, complicated names has given rise to a tremendous number of acronyms — words made up of the initial letters of the original multi-word title. The United States military and the United Nations are prime examples of organizations which utilize the acronym. Certainly *WAC, CARE, GI, WASP UNESCO, RADAR, SEATO, SONAR,* and *NATO* are familiar to most students. Every year at the University of Vermont the students have their own version of a "Sadie Hawkins" week. While it is formally titled "Men's Economic Recovery Program," students affectionately refer to it as *MERP Week*. Other student organizations which utilize an easy-to-remember acronym for their names include *SCOPE, DART,* and *BEAM*. Class discussion of the symbolic or connotative meanings associated with the acronyms proved fruitful. *BEAM*, for example, is the popular name of the Burlington Ecumenical Action Ministry. An interesting acronym is *tp* meaning 'toilet paper.' When it undergoes a functional shift from noun to verb, it takes the inflectional endings of a verb.

Americans seem to be extremely fond of brevity. In addition to including acronyms, which are in essence a form of abbreviation, their speech evidences a willingness to substitute a part of a word for the whole word. It is not uncommon to hear a student say he took an *exam*, went to the *lab* with a *co-ed*, or could not go on the *bus* because he had the *flu*. These are examples of "clipped" or "shortened" forms. *Cap, porno,* and *rents* show how the words *capsule, pornography,* and *parents* have been shortened for ease in communication.

We also found an example of an analogical creation, a process by which a new word is formed on the basis of an analogy with an existing form. A child does exactly this when he says *singed* for *sang* or *sheeps* for *sheep*. On the basis of such pairs as *teach-teacher, sing-singer,* and *call-caller,* students at the university took the verb *merp* and created the agent-noun *merper* (i.e, 'one who merps').

Finally, several root-creations were among the items gathered. Onomatopoeia is probably the most common form of root-creation. Just as *bang, quack, twitter,* and *whirr* suggest specific noises or the objects producing them, *Z's* represents a decided effort to imitate the sound of a sleeping person. In much the same way, the sound of a word can suggest symbolic associations. For example, *doof* suggests the slow, sluggish qualities of a dullard, and *unco* elicits the notion of awkwardness.

Other word formations that arise when examining words in a slang dictionary are back-formation, compounding, and blending. Babysitter → *babysit*, hot + dog = *hotdog*, and television + broadcast = *telecast* illustrate these formations respectively.

In dealing with the individual entries in the slang dictionary outside of class, we limited the students to assigning a part of speech label and to providing a definition. During class periods, however, our discussions turned to the questions of syllabification, pronunciation, etymology, idiomatic phrasing, and connotation. With only the most elementary introduction to phonemic transcription, the students, with some success, provided pronunciations for the more difficult or unfamiliar words in their listing. They particularly enjoyed looking up their slang terms (or variations thereof) in the *DA*, the *DAS*, the *OED*, and Weseen's *Dictionary of American Slang* (New York, 1934). For example, for the item *dump on* which means 'to ridicule' (literally 'to shit on'), the students found that, according to the *DAS, dump a load* means 'to defecate.'

For the most part, the assigning of a part of speech label

was routine. However, when words which could fulfill several functions were encountered, problems arose. One student submitted the item *tp*, labeled it as a noun, and gave for its definition 'toilet paper.' This would have been fine if her sample sentence had been, "Who stole the tp?" However, the sample sentence given on the data collection card read, "We tp'd the student's car." Soon the class discovered that we were dealing with not only a noun but also a verb which meant 'to wrap in toilet paper.' Similar situations arose for several of the other slang terms.

Providing definitions for the terms they had collected proved to be not only the most frustrating part of the project for the students but also the most interesting and educational. It was not long before they realized that they had been using words for several months or even years without ever being able to give a dictionary definition for the terms. In addition, they found themselves in the position of having to decide whether to adopt a descriptive or prescriptive philosophy to govern their work. Since they felt, and rightly so, that slang is vibrant and alive, they readily saw the benefits of trying to record and describe the slang. Their basic problems might best be labeled as "lack of precision": they failed to see, at first, the various senses and nuances for each item: frequently they gave in to the temptation to define slang with slang: and, finally, they found themselves caught in the one-word, one-meaning dilemma.

An examination of several entries in *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (Second College Edition) was revealing. The twenty-three senses or nuances provided for *mind* (p. 904) and the thirty-two for *time* (p. 1489) impressed upon the students the need for sensitivity and perception in handling words. They were forced to go back and consult the various contexts in which the words they had collected were used. The definitions, on the sample page, for *bag it, cool, heavy,* and *jello* are indicative of their attempts to differentiate the various senses for each word.

Perhaps as a result of being asked to define something that is as personal and informal as slang, the students, either consciously or unconsciously, found it difficult to avoid defining slang with slang. Usually this was resolved in class discussion when alternative phrasings for the definitions were offered by other students. There were, however, several instances where the "slangy" definitions seemed the most appropriate. In these cases the students were careful to cross-reference the terms in the definition with entries in the dictionary proper.

Slang, perhaps more than any other facet of language, shows the futility of trying to assign one meaning to one word. In addition to the numerous senses in which a word can be used, students realized that they were using the same word (symbol) to denote several entirely different things. Although they knew from prior experience that words often change in meaning over a period of time, they were not aware of multiple meanings for a word at any given time. The item *flash* in the sample listing is a case in point. Another example is *head*. One student said that a *head* is "an individual who sells or possesses drugs." Another student countered, "You're wrong! A head is an individual who uses drugs." The situation was further confused when a third student stated that a *head* "is a toilet." When the laughter subsided, the students confronted the problem — who was right? After several minutes of argument which seemed to lead to nowhere, one student asked, "Why can't all three be right?" Why not? The obvious had eluded them for the moment; they soon accepted the notion that a single word can denote many things, depending, of course, upon the context and the agreement of the users.

The students found their investigation of the whole area of connotation valuable and stimulating. They quickly recognized the pitfalls that an organization encounters when it hastily adopts an acronym for its title. They saw that *CARE* (Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere) is a name which elicits public sympathy, while Stokely Carmichael's *SNCC* [snick] (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) arouses numerous hostile personal feelings. Recently, some students at the university received a federal grant for an ecology project on the Burlington waterfront. They appropriately named their project *WATER* (Water, Area, Transportation, Environmental Resources). The connotations associated with terms for police officer, *pig, fuzz, narc,* are obvious. A term that surprised us was *freaky*: perhaps it is a reflection of our age. While it had derogatory connotations for us, it had for the students favorable or honorific associations.

It is interesting that nearly every student reported the following items: *fine, groovy, heavy, hip, peachy, real,* and *super*. These terms were popularized on college campuses nationwide during the 1960's. Originally they all were used as superlatives to note one's approval or appreciation of something (e.g., "That trumpet player has a groovy sound"). Curiously, however, while most in-state students said that they used these terms with the original meanings

intact, the majority of out-of-staters reported that these words, while still used frequently by them, were employed only when their intent was sarcastic or satiric. By simply changing their intonation, they completely changed the meaning and thus prolonged the life of the word in their vocabularies. For example, in "Oh, that's groovy," the intent is to mock or deride rather than to compliment. In addition, the students reported that their attitudes toward another student were often determined by the individual's vocabulary. If they noticed someone, for example, using *freaky* in a critical context or *groovy* without a sarcastic purpose, they would classify that person as "out of it" or "not with it."

So successful was this entire project that we are asking students this semester to compile their own dictionaries of slang and terms related to specific activities and subjects: skiing, music, waitressing, fraternity and sorority life, cars, and academic life, for example. Variations on our basic goals and methods abound. Comparisons of individual dictionaries on skiing, or comparisons of slang from the same linguistic community covering a period for several years or more, or investigations emphasizing the possible origins of particular terms are just a few suggestions. The important point for the teacher to keep in mind is that for a project of this kind to work effectively he must make it his own, adapting it to his own particular objectives, the nature of the linguistic community at his disposal, and the needs of his particular students.

The study of slang was interesting for teachers and students alike. We were excited about the classroom possibilities that such an activity offered us and we, in turn, stimulated our students. There was also a bit of nostalgia for us in the comparisons we often made between present-day slang and the slang we once used. Finally, for the students, the group nature of the work they were doing and the naturalness and practicality of their assignments were impressive features of the project. They understood the necessity of investigating the data that they compiled and they found themselves actually working with the dynamics of the language, its etymologies, word-formation techniques, and the many mechanisms that help to make language so fascinating.

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